

Autobio-graphic Space: Reconciling African American Identity with the (In)Visible Past

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Space, like language, is socially constructed; and like the syntax of language, the spatial arrangements of our buildings and communities reflect and reinforce the nature of gender, race, and class relations in society. The uses of both language and space contribute to the power of some groups over others and the maintenance of human inequality.(1)

In this project, I explore what I call “Autobio-graphic Architecture,” and the ways in which it can facilitate a reconciliation of African American identity today with its (In)Visible Past. The social construction of space and language, pointed out by Leslie Karnes Weisman, is crucial to understanding the role of autobiography in recovering and designing (re)presentations of African American architecture. Thus, our stories and identities need to be recovered and told—both through language, and spatial constructs. While emphasizing that we should learn from the past in order to embrace our present *identities*, I will argue for designing structures that construct American identity as “reconciling” with, and reflecting inclusive and egalitarian spaces for a diverse and multivalent society. The journey I present here is an autobiographical account of my search for an architecture that expresses and constructs identity beyond the stereotypes of “race” and hegemonic “culture,” while also celebrating what LaVerne Wells-Bowie calls “rooted[ness] in actual cultural experience and racial memory.”(2)

As William L. Andrews stated in his introduction to *African American Autobiography: A Collection of Critical Essays*, “autobiography holds a position of priority, indeed many would say preeminence, among the narrative traditions of black America.” Indeed, “ours is an extraordinarily self-reflexive tradition.”(3) As I want to argue, this self-reflectivity

ought to become an important feature of the “education of an architect.” If we are ever to go beyond hegemonic pedagogues and professional practices that replicates them, we must learn how to engage in what bell hooks terms “recall[ing] yourself.”(4) Such a shift in how we view architecture implies a decisive revision of how we define our whole discipline, and our roles and identities in it. In Wells-Bowie’s words, we should “want...[our] relationship to space to evoke architecture as it is informed by the humanities, not architecture simply as a technical art.”(5)

While employing Toni Morrison’s creed that “the past is more infinite than the future,” I argue, then, that architecture, like literature, writes its own narratives, which reflect specific constructions of identity. For example, Toni Morrison and Ralph Ellison, consciously wanted “space” to find themselves in American literary tradition, in which they were invisible. Like architects, like masters of language, they had to construct it for themselves. Ellison’s novel, *Invisible Man*, and Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, show that it is possible to reconcile past and present. These works—a novel and a series of literary critical essays—can be read as African American autobiographic proofs that we can heal the wounds caused by the legacy of slavery, and construct a space where an all-inclusive *American identity can be recalled*. In these writers, such a reconciliation involves an autobiographical examination of the ways in which knowledge that has been passed on to us can, as Toni Morrison says, “[be] transformed from invasion and conquest to revelation and choice.”(6) Again, such unlearning, or decolonization of one’s mind, is a desired goal for the “education of the architect/designer.”

Like Morrison, who wrote her books because she wanted to read about people like herself, I find myself in search of a similar “space,” revelation,

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Figure 1. View from the African slave auction hall at Elmina Castle in Elmina, Ghana

Figure 3. The first Anglican Chapel in Ghana above and the entry to the male slave dungeon below.

Figure 2. "Door of no return." Entry to the male slave dungeon

Images courtesy of coleman a. jordan.



and choice that can house and express African American identity today. Through my autobiographical architectural constructs, I want to reach into the past to reconstruct the present, and create spaces and details in which there are no “invisible” people. A solid foundation reinforces the sustainability of most structures. To blacks in America, that foundation has been obstructed, a *scab*(7), by the social constructions of “race” and racialized definition of American identity. The following statement qualifies this paradox of African American identity:

Think of how much a black person has to sell of himself/ (herself) to try to get race not to matter... You have to ignore the insults. You have to ignore the natural loyalties. You have to ignore your past. In a sense, you have to just about deny yourself.(8)

Such denial means erasure of one’s identity, and thus, of one’s roots in the past, not to mention one’s cultural heritage in the present. This should be unacceptable, not only to blacks, but to all Americans. In effect, “race matters,”(9) is the corner stone of my work that spans the continents of North America and Africa. By looking into the narratives inscribed into African slave structures, I attempt to construct architecture of African American identity. As bell hooks says, “It is the telling of our history that enables political [and architectural] self-recovery.”(10) My autobiographical narrative today recovers Cape Coast Castle in Ghana, West Africa, as a space for reconciliation between the past and present constructs, and the new awareness of African American and American identity.

“Sankofa,” a Call to the “Motherland.”(11)

This project employs the results of my research in Ghana, while I participated in a preservation program sponsored by US/ICOMOS (United States/International Committee on Monuments and Sites), and my recent work in both Charleston, SC and Liverpool, England. As multinational slave trade centers, the African slave castles provided meeting spaces and “contact zones,” as Mary Louise Pratt would call it, for the cultures of North and South Americas, and Europe.(12) This coming together of diverse European and “American,” traders in “African gold/human flesh” inspired my inquiry into the specific national and ethnic cultures, whose histories were inscribed into the castles. These cultures were subsumed under all-encompassing geographic, and thus, in a sense, spatial generalizations—i.e., American, African, European.

My research of the slave structures focuses on the ways in which they represent more specific cultural identities and power relations. More important, I examine the stories of survival of the oppressed, and the power/arrogance of the oppressors that were imprinted on the slave castles. My scholarly, and autobiographical, project in Ghana is closely linked to my study of repressed and “invisible” identities encoded in American structures, and the practice and teaching of architecture. I hope to show that the architectural legacy of the African Diaspora should provide a context for reading structures that represent dominant American identity. By examining the conspicuous erasures and absences of the Africanist presence from legacies such as Thomas Jefferson, an architect in his own right who America has structurally memorialized:

For all this the enforcers of white supremacy claimed, and with justice, a mandate in Thomas Jefferson’s well-known doctrine that there was no place for free blacks in American society. If blacks were emancipated and yet remained in America and in the South, then they had to be brought under restraint.(13)

e. g., the Jefferson Memorial, we can begin to reconstruct American identity, to “recall” its true cultural heritage.

Although I was in Ghana to research the preservation efforts concerning numerous castles and forts that served the African slave trade along Ghana’s West Coast, I could not resist the call of my ancestors from whence they came. And “come” is not exactly the verb that reflects the historical facts of their removal.

My focus, Cape Coast Castle, one of three appellation castles, was first constructed by the Swedes in 1653. (Figure 1) It was later occupied by the British and the Dutch, due to a change of hands following battles for trade positioning. From this castle trade expanded to the Caribbean, England, and the United States. The castle site was strategically planned, with its foundation upon a rock bed pier on the water’s edge of Cape Coast City, the former capital of Ghana during the colonial period when it was governed by England.(14) The dominant scale of the castle is overwhelming, compared to other nearby structures. However, those near-by structures tend to face inland, or away from the castle, as if to deny its presence. The castle’s appearance, though imposing in scale, is often ignored by the inhabitants of the area. The form seems to be left alone, desolate, and meaningless. But humbled it is not, as it still stands proud, as a painful reminder of the past but also a “space” where reunion and return are now

possible. As a space that embodies and requires *autobio-graphic* architectural revisions, it can teach us much about the painful and guilt-ridden origins of what we today call African American identity as well as American identity.

"White-washed history" is a term that has been used by those activists opposing the preservation efforts to describe the renovated facades as having suffered an erasure of their characteristic historic texture and authenticity. This argument stems from good evidence, as visitors often question, "is this a new building?" when referring to the castles and forts that have been preserved or renovated like that. Cape Coast Castle was no exception, and I, too, was taken by the "white-washed" vibrant nuance of the facade. Just as the erasure and erosion of these structures were setting in, the erasure of education about the history they represented was also undergoing a process of "white-washing."

Astonishingly enough, because of their colonized education in the past, many Ghanaians in the present have not learned the stories of the castles that dominate their coastal landscape.

The authenticity of Cape Coast Castle's facade—the stone and brick from the eighteenth century—has been painted over and, in some cases, parts have been replaced without any account having been left of the old texture. The contrast of images "before preservation" and "after" may, in effect, be indicating that these monuments, that carry much historical depth, seem to have been vandalized. After all, these castles contain the history of many cultures, not to mention that they sustained many European and American economies for centuries. For example, Charleston, South Carolina, where two thirds of America's African slave population landed, succeeded to break free of recession due to productivity of African slaves tending to

its numerous fields and plantations. Like South Carolina plantations, the castles and forts in Ghana are now seen as tourist attractions. They are controlled by organizations like GMMB (Ghana's Monuments and Museum Board) and individual European investors that seem to capitalize on their painful history. Even worse, these exploiters of historic spaces often eagerly erase their character under the guise of preservation, which is often conducted without much sympathy for those to whom these spaces embody their sacred past.

For example, there were proposals to convert the slave castles into hotels and restaurants, which were abandoned only after heavy protest from Ghana's African American community and Africanists from the West Indies. Thanks to these protests, many of the structures will become historical museums that are needed to educate both the inhabitants of the areas around them, and the tourists who will come to visit them. Looking at historic slave structures as possibilities for capitalist investments only proves that their original oppressive functions still prevail. Thus the painful history of the "other" is overlooked and, in some cases, identities that are rooted in them irrevocably lost. As John Michael Vlach argues for his research of such structures, it is important to "recover the dimensions of southern architectural history that have...been too long overlooked and unreported."⁽¹⁵⁾ Only when more Americans realize the critical nature of knowing their inter-connected roles in history, will identity politics become an issue of the past. America must become accountable for and face its own identity.

Such coming face to face with their identity means, among other things, that Americans preserve not only the past of slavery at home but also "go back to Africa" to study the structures there.

Thus, while keeping in mind that we need to inquire, as Vlach says, "[in] back of the big house," let us leap from the American South back to Cape Coast Castle in Ghana.⁽¹⁶⁾ The plan of this form, outside of the defensive post along the ridge of the castle, is introverted in design as to focus all attention on the inside courtyard, where slaves were routinely brought in, and where the traders came to make their purchases. Designed as early shopping malls, the castles became markets for booming trade in weapons and gold/human flesh. Their functions dictated their design—it had to help separate and sort the humans for sale, and to communicate the power and might that defended their precious contents.

The Governor's Quarters, the master-controller's space of power and indolence was situated overlooking the courtyard on the central axis in line of the entry gate and the exit into the sea. He was positioned in order to always know who entered and who exited. The inhabitants in charge of these structures were governors and officers, as well as their soldiers or crewmen sent from European countries to purchase, sell, and protect their merchandise. For example, the Danish castle, Christianborg Castle, which is located in Accra, Ghana, documents its officers as, "out-cast at home, convicts released from Copenhagen jails, bankrupts, or plain rejects from a Danish society eager to get rid of them."

In their "castles" overseas, such "masters," then, "could lead a life of indolence, with little or no restraint. There they might indulge nearly every human passion with utter freedom, whether it be confirmed drunkenness, or unrestrained intercourse with Negro girls. They knew that the deadly climate

was likely to claim them, so it was a 'short life and a merry one' for many of these outcasts." (17)

As mentioned before, overlooking the courtyard and on axis to it, as if to manage or maintain order within the castle, was the governor's quarters. Its central location allowed a view all around with a constant breeze to cool the inhabitants. Cape Coast Castle saw many Governors of different European nationalities. The setting was elaborate compared to settings for the rest of the castle population, enabling them to lay in comfort of both conscience and greed, far from the scenes of pain and torture.

The Store Room often revealed a secret passageway to the women's dungeon. The secret and dark spaces, "passages" and pleasures of hidden power are suggested here. Apart from house wines and objects of personal value, the governor's store room thus also had in store a raw passageway to the women's dungeon, where the master could choose to go for personal pleasure. Female slaves were routinely selected for such "inspection of goods." In these spaces, the governor could play out his dual role of master-leader and rapist.

Palaver Hall, the auction hall, was where merchants/shippers came to purchase their goods. The stillness of this room was as if suspended in time. The ghostly presence of the past howled through this empty room with gaping, arched windows positioned along the side for ventilation and light. Ventilation was provided for the buyers, so that they could breathe easily as they chose their purchases; there was light so that they could see the best of the human stock. Then there is "the wall" that, like the whole room, seems suspended in time, the wall which used to be the backdrop against which the enslaved were sold. A stage of sorts, it celebrated dehumanization; it is a platform, where the slaves

appeared with no name, no identity, no life, where they were paraded as mere objects. I grew curious about the effects and emotions of tourists who were in the room with me—both the descendants of the Diaspora as well as the descendants of the oppressors. After all, our "common," painful heritage was all around us....

"On Being Brought from Africa to America"(18)

'Twas mercy brought me from my *Pagan* land,
Taught my benighted soul to understand
That there's a God,
there's a *Saviour* too;
Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.
Some view our sable race with scornful eye,
"Their colour is a diabolic die."
Remember, *Christians, Negroes,*
black as *Cain* (19),
May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train.

The Chapel, the first Anglican church in Ghana, was located in Cape Coast Castle. Christianity was the "white" religion that saved only a chosen few. Might the presence of the chapel signify, though, that maybe there was a conscience to be found in the traders after all? Upon closer examination a paradox is revealed. The chapel is founded/supported by the walls of the male slave dungeons. The entry's greedy "mouth" is directly below the floor of the chapel. The chapel's windows seem to be "eyes" placed above a mouth which resembles, in yet another architectural inter-text, the famous entry and portal of *Palazzetto Zuccari* in Rome. Rasmussen calls Zuccari's portal the "gaping jaws of a giant." (20) A similar association can be made with the dungeon entrance at Cape Coast Castle, windows-eyes peering atop the gaping mouth-entry as if to watch those entering with a "scornful eye." We may want to ask, after Phyllis

Wheatley's poem, on whose shoulders, sweat and blood are the church foundations constructed and who receives the burden of redemption?

In the Dungeons...
A charnel stench,
effluvium of living death
spreads outward from the hold,
where the living and the dead,
the horribly dying,
lie interlocked,
lie foul with blood and excrement. (21)

Suffocation, suffocation from lack of air and suffocation from lack of life (or do we dare say "identity"?). The odor, the odorous presence of flesh, stale blood, pain, and death. The excrement and decayed bones that have lain unsettled for centuries are there to this day, they are the floor we walked on. Imagine thousands of slaves packed in overcrowded spaces with no light, no ventilation, no contact with the outside. The dungeons and the structure itself seem to preserve the imprint of their presence. As we know, many had been raped, tortured; some women bore the children of their rapists there, never to see them again after they had been separated from the mothers on the auction block. Millions died in the dungeons from poisonous sewage, tropical diseases, trauma, fear, claustrophobia, and suffocation.

If this feels like a journey, it is because it was one for me. (22)

Like a conclusion or climax, the coldness of the gate at the end of the castle was poignant. I felt this doorway, this "doorway of no return", stared at me, followed me around as if to draw me to it. In this sense it clearly provided a frame and an end to the narrative of our passage. Indeed it is referred to as the "doorway of no return"—the final exit for a slave before she or he reached the destiny in a new land or died at

sea. (Figure 2) As I was told about this final exit by a tour guide during my first visit, I heard that this passage was the exit through which my ancestors were never to return to this place. I immediately looked him the eye and stated, "well, I guess I've returned."

Sankofa!

That bird is wise,
Look. Its beak, back turned, picks
For the present, what is best
from ancient eyes,
Then steps forward, on ahead
To meet the future, undeterred.(23)

Like stories from the past, the monuments, buildings, and sites inscribe not only (his)story but also (our)story as the descendants of Africans in Diaspora. Just as structures are supported on foundations, our origins still inform the present. They are silently whispering the truth about both "his" story and "ours" in white-dominated, patriarchal America. Once the space and detail are created, or corrupted, in the structure, the erasure or distortion of stories and people are etched within the walls.

The entry into the male dungeon at Cape Coast Castle, an entry into our past, is a symbolic construct of a womb/wound of the "motherland" who was raped, deprived of her identity, and who has never healed. This dungeon-"mouth" expelled and devoured many African lives.(Figure 3) It is a space where both death and survival coexisted, much like they do in other sites that witnessed martyrology and genocide.(24)

The stories of the present, are the effects of what was erected and erased in the past. More inclusive education and the communication age have allowed the "other" to see through the deceptions and contradictions that are still often called "tradition." Today we are thus, the descendants of those whose histories sketched and drafted "us,"

wrote us into who we are. But our present identity still raises questions and creates a need to unlearn and reconstruct traditional knowledge about origins and functions of identity.

In embracing the past we can at least try to come to terms with who we are and how we have been represented. The healing must begin with the desire to know and learn about each other. For example, Nana Cofu Robinson, an African American, lives in-sync with the people of Ghana by embracing their culture and understanding his own.

In "our" stories to come, the future, we attempt to construct an ideal identity by mapping and transforming into positive material the past pain, cruelty, and redemption. In my work, I have realized that I am also retracing a profound Diasporic journey. However, this journey is not simply "back to Africa." My narrative is located between Ghana and the United States and maps one of many routes of self-study that can help both African Americans and all Americans alike to reconcile a difficult past with an uneasy present in a multiethnic culture. It is a look at autobiographical readings of space as erected by and erecting American identity.

I was inspired by the Nsibidi symbols of African origins about which you can read in Robert Farris Thompson's, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy*. This symbol is a metaphorical representation of strength that I have derived from my journey thus far. The original symbol means "all the country belongs to me." It was one of the many symbols used to communicate by Africans in Diaspora. I now (re)interpret it as my logo to mean, his land belongs to me—and—us. It's all inclusive!

bell hooks emphasizes that "overall, we have to think deeply about the cultural legacies that can sustain us, that can protect us against the cultural genocide

that is daily destroying our past. We need to document the existence of living traditions, both past and present, that can heal our wounds and offer us a space of opportunity where our lives can be transformed."(25)

The appearance of the slave castles as such spaces for transformation of identity can be very deceiving, as the preservation efforts are unclear in their goals. These castles relate different meanings to different people and the reactions to them vary widely. Yet the question remains—why is this part of world history unknown and unclear to so many? It was W. E. B. DuBois who said, "millions of Black men (and women) in Africa, America and the Islands of the Sea...are bound to have great influence upon the world in the future." That future is now, but I want to stress that we must continue "mapping" the past so that we can live together in the more honest and egalitarian present.

As I have shown, the Diasporic roots of many American blacks are architecturally represented by slave castles in West Africa. In my discussion, I have focused on the preservation efforts in Ghana, West Africa, that have enabled many black Americans like myself to visit the slave castles as tourists who seek structures that symbolize their past and cultural roots. While emphasizing that we should learn from the past in order to embrace our present *identities*, I thus hope to design structures that construct American identity as "reconciling" with and reflecting inclusive and egalitarian spaces for a diverse and multivalent society. Thus the journey I have presented here is an autobiographical account of a search for my architecture, one that expresses and constructs identity beyond the stereotypes of "race" and hegemonic "culture."

Notes

1. Leslie Kanes Weisman, *Discrimination by Design: A Feminist Critique of the Man-Made Environment* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, Illini Books edition, 1994), 2.

2. Wells-Bowie's quote comes from the chapter "Talking Black Space," in bell hooks, *Art On My Mind: Visual Politics* (New York: The New Press, 1995), 153.

3. William L. Andrews, *African American Autobiography: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc. 1993), 1. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., quoted after Andrews, p.1.

4. hooks, *Art On My Mind*, 153

5. Wells-Bowie quoted in hooks, *Art On My Mind*, 154.

6. Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: The New Press, 1995), 8.

7. Lebbeus Woods, "War and Architecture," in *Pamphlet Architecture* 15, (Princeton Architectural Press, 1993), 24.

8. Mark Whitaker, "White and Black Lies." *Newsweek*, 15 November, (1993).

9. Cornell West, *Race Matters* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993).

10. bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 176.

11. This term is used in the description of a Ghanaian Adinkra (a past king of Gyaman, now Ivory Coast) symbol which means, "It is no taboo to return and fetch it when you forget."

12. Mary Louis Pratt, "Acts of the Contact Zone" in *Profession* 91 (1991): 34.

13. Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*.

14. Albert van Datzig, *Forts and Castles of Ghana* (Accra, Ghana: Sedco Publishing Limited, 1980).

15. John Michael Vlach, *Back of the Big House: The Architecture of*

Plantation Slavery (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993), xii.

16. Vlach, *Back of the Big House*.

17. Isodor Paiewonsky, *Eyewitness Accounts of Slavery in the Danish West Indies: Also Graphic Tales of Other Slave Happenings on Ships and Plantations* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1989), 15-16.

18. Phyllis Wheatley, "On Being Brought from Africa to America" in *The Norton Anthology: African American Literature* (New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company, 1997), 170.

19. Cain is said to have been "marked" by God. Some readers of the Bible thought that Cain thereby became the first black man.

20. Steen Eiler Rasmussen, *Experiencing Architecture* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1993), 38.

21. Robert Hayden, "Middle Passage," in *The Norton Anthology: African American Literature*, 104-107th verse (New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company, 1997), 1504.

22. A term originally used by Nana Cofu Robinson and Queen Mother Robinson to describe the final departure gate for African slaves from the castles and forts.

23. Albert W. Kayper-Mensah, *Sankofa: Adinkra Poems* (Tema: The Ghana Publishing Corporation, 1976), 4.

24. Although not included in this paper, I have begun to make comparative studies to architectural structures of martyrology, such as Auschwitz, and African slave entry ports in Liverpool, England.

25. hooks, *Art On My Mind*, 162.

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